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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the impact of traditional Vietnamese culture, family relationships, and bicultural conflicts on children's development and adjustment. Vietnamese parents tend to have relatively low levels of English language proficiency and education, low-paying jobs, and few financial resources. Although they work hard to improve their lives through U.S. opportunities, they are also committed to retaining their values and culture. Vietnamese children who are the least assimilated into U.S. youth subcultures tend to show the highest levels of academic performance. Cultural conflicts between immigrant parents and children born or reared in the United States are common. Vietnamese families face the following types of bicultural problems in achieving generational consonance: (1) parental authority; (2) modes of punishment; (3) views on U.S. culture; (4) role reversal; and (5) gender roles. Schools and other organizations that work with Vietnamese youth and their families can help them bridge the cultural gap through ethnic community, especially by understanding the effects of family loss, exile, and resettlement. Schools and other organizations should work with Vietnamese elders as well as students and try to improve ties between Vietnamese communities and the schools. Culturally sensitive adult and peer group assistance can help children develop bicultural ties and skills. Establishing Vietnamese language classes and other programs featuring ethnic culture can enhance the scholastic performance of Vietnamese students. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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The Biculturation of the Vietnamese Student

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THE BICULTURATION OF THE VIETNAMESE STUDENT

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese Americans became members of one of the United States' largest refugee groups. By 1990, the group numbered over 615,000, a 40-fold increase in just 15 years. The Vietnamese came to the United States from a culture vastly different from most American cultures. Settled into socially isolated and poor ethnic enclaves with inferior local schools and streets beset by gangs and drugs, adult refugees remain poor but want desperately to get ahead without abandoning their native values, norms, beliefs, behavioral standards, and expectations. Thus, Vietnamese children often find themselves straddling two social worlds. At home or within their ethnic community they hear that they must work hard and do well in school in order to move up; on the street they are advised to rebel against authority and reject achievement goals; and today's popular culture espouses lifestyles and consumption standards that raise children's expectations well beyond those of their parents.

These contradictory messages have produced a variety of responses. At the same time that Vietnamese children have been gaining a reputation for outstanding academic achievement (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992), notorious Vietnamese youth gangs have emerged in many American cities (Long, 1996). Some Vietnamese children have scrapes with the law, and even commit violent crimes. Many students are still struggling with language problems, behind-grade-level education, and limited access to Vietnamese counselors.

In order to help educators and counselors deal effectively with the problems of Vietnamese children and encourage their achievement, this digest discusses the impact of traditional Vietnamese culture, family relationships, and bicultural conflicts on the children's development and adjustment.

Vietnamese Commitment to Their Native Culture

Vietnamese parents tend to have relatively low levels of English language proficiency and education, low-paying jobs, and few financial resources. Though they work hard to improve their lives by taking advantage of American opportunities, they are also strongly committed to retaining their culture, values, and customs. So, for example, while Vietnamese parents encourage their children to learn everything that public schools can teach them, they also have established Vietnamese language classes in their communities in order to involve the children in Vietnamese community life, promote maintenance of their distinctive culture, and socialize them into accepting the goals and ambitions of their elders (Saito, 1999).

Vietnamese American children who are the least assimilated into American youth subcultures tend to show the highest levels of academic performance (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This apparently paradoxical situation may be understood by recognizing the value of traditional customs in eliciting the most productive behavior by children. Lower performing children who exhibit nonconformist attitudes and behavior are likely to be rejected and stigmatized by Vietnamese communities. This ostracism places these children at risk in two ways. First, they are likely to assimilate into the adversarial youth cultures of the low-income neighborhoods that surround them. Second, they tend to be labeled as outsiders by their elders, who concentrate their efforts on "good kids."

Intergenerational Conflicts

Despite the commitment of Vietnamese refugees to traditional values, economic necessity has forced them to draw upon their traditions selectively in reconstructing social institutions in the U.S. But they also retain certain norms and values of their home society, which continue to provide the standards for assessing their accomplishments.

Cultural conflicts between immigrant parents and children born or reared in the United States are common. In the case of the Vietnamese, differing life experiences of the children growing up in the U.S. and their immigrant parents can turn the generational gap into a chasm (Rumbaut, 1997; 1999). Young people want to be accepted by their American friends, not their foreign- born peers, and they internalize public and peer messages that the important things in life are personal prestige, instant gratification, and conspicuous consumption. Children often see their parents as holding tightly to "old world" norms. Parents see their children as overly attracted to the least constructive sides of American culture. Vietnamese families face the following types of bicultural problems in achieving generational consonance.

Parental Authority

Parents and children often disagree on the extent of parental authority, with most Vietnamese children complaining that their parents are too strict (Kibria, 1993; Nash, 1992; Saito, 1999). In Vietnam, even grown children are expected to obey their parents (Muzny, 1989), although many Vietnamese children in the United States may well require a significant amount of control, since careful supervision can help them resist pressures in their troubled neighborhood. The danger is that excessive parental efforts at control can lead to open rebellion in the American environment, and parents can worsen the very problems they seek to avoid.

Modes of Punishment

Many of the means of enforcing parental authority common in Vietnam are unacceptable in the U.S., such as physical punishment, which is sometimes severe. In the U.S., this is not only resented by children, who may see themselves as abused, but discouraged or even forbidden by American institutions. Indeed, police or school authorities have become involved in the protection of children from excessive punishment by parents or other elders (Kibria,1993), and strictly disciplined homes have been cited by teenagers as a reason why they ran away (Muzny, 1989). Disagreements within the family about the legitimacy of physical punishment, coupled with mainstream American disapproval of it, makes Vietnamese parents unsure of the proper way to correct their offspring.

Views on American Culture

Parents and children differ about what aspects of American

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culture are desirable. The children consider "being American" in terms of wearing fashionable clothes, enjoying personal freedom, and being "cool"; they want to do things like going out late at night and spending their parents' money. Parents, conversely, describe the positive side of "being American" as taking advantage of educational opportunities in the U.S. and having a professional career (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Role Reversal

The role reversal of parents and children that frequently occurs in immigrant families is contrary to the expectations of Vietnamese parents. The ability of parents to exercise traditional authority over their children is often undermined by the fact that children acquire power in the family by learning English more thoroughly than their parents, and by becoming more familiar with American society. Parents who cannot talk to their children's teachers cannot follow their children's schoolwork and even have difficulty learning if their children are actually attending school. Children who take care of their parents can become contemptuous.

Gender Roles

Historically, Vietnamese women were expected to marry early, bear children, and serve their husbands; their education and employment were strictly limited (Hickey, 1964). Migration to the United States caused some changes in the family structure, though, as the Vietnamese have applied their concept of "innovative traditionalism" to gender roles. The expectation that young women will be able to get good jobs leads families to push daughters, as well as sons, to achieve academically, although daughters still have household responsibilities (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In addition, the activities of young women outside the home are much more highly restricted and supervised than are their brothers (Nash, 1992), and families often frown upon even casual dating by girls. Young women who find themselves caught between the social expectations of their peers and the restrictions of their parents may rebel against the latter. Even when daughters obey their parents, they may feel angry at their treatment.

Conclusion

Schools and other organizations that work with Vietnamese youth and their families can help them bridge the cultural gap through ethnic community. Specifically, teachers and counselors can promote intergenerational understanding by the following actions:

(1) *Understand the effects of family loss, exile, and resettlement on students and their families.*

(2) *Work with Vietnamese elders as well as children*, and help parents feel welcome in the institutions serving their children, both individually and through meetings with Vietnamese parent organizations.

(3) Improve ties between the Vietnamese communities and the schools, drawing on the social institutions and resources of the community to give recognition to the accomplishments of their young and to discourage undesirable forms of behavior. Use community members who are bilingual professionals as staff members or volunteers to work with children and establish and maintain ties with their communities.

(4) Provide culturally sensitive adult and peer group assistance to help Vietnamese children cope with family and community pressures and anxiety from bicultural conflicts.

(5) Help children develop bicultural ties and skills. This can be done through both mastery of English and good adjustment to American institutions and involvement in Vietnamese community organizations and Vietnamese school clubs directed toward preparation for life in America. Promote student-organized Vietnamese cultural activities to allow them to the bring the rich Vietnamese heritage to their schools, lessening their sense of isolation in school while at the same time strengthening relations with co-ethnic peers and elders.

(6) Establish Vietnamese language classes and other programs featuring ethnic culture to enhance the scholastic performance of Vietnamese students and encourage members of the school staff and student body to learn about the rich Vietnamese cultures.

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